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By-Corbin, Richard

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Schools must attempt to identify and develop those gifted young people who, because of environment and background, are faced with limited opportunities for achievement. At Hunter College High School, New York City, a program was instituted in which "disadvantaged, but potentially gifted" students made up 25% of each entering seventh-grade class. Identified largely by subjective means, the students attended a required special summer orientation program but, once admitted, they became an integral part of the student body, receiving no special treatment as a group. The first-year attrition rate proved high, but the number of dropouts decreased as selection techniques improved and as faculty and students matured in dealing with the special problems of the program. Tasks not yet completed in the program include (1) incorporating in the reading program material of literary distinction that relates to students with ghetto backgrounds, (2) deciding on the meaning and importance of grades for "intellectually gifted" secondary students, and (3) developing techniques for giving needed supplementary help to special students without setting them apart. If gifted disadvantaged students are not adequately educated, many potentially valuable members of society will be lost. (LH)

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Associate Editor: Robert J. Gemmett, *State University College, Brockport*
Associate Editor: Elizabeth J. Drake, *Binghamton*

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ADVISORS

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CHARLES G. SPIEGLER
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SISTER THOMAS MARION
Nazareth College Rochester

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A PROGRAM FOR THE POTENTIALLY-GIFTED DISADVANTAGED: A PROGRESS REPORT

Richard Corbin

Andy is black, lives in a tenement, is failing in school, in the current jargon is labeled "disadvantaged." Juan is brown, lives in a tenement, is failing in school, is referred to as "disadvantaged." Mary is white and blonde, lives in a tenement, is failing in school, also qualifies for the appelation "disadvantaged."

Now reconsider. If Mary lived in a suburban colonial home and attended a "college preparatory" school, she might still rank academically at the bottom of her class. Or if Juan lived in a medium-priced condominium and attended a so-so comprehensive school, he might be succeeding quite well enough as an average student to qualify for admission to a junior, if not a senior, college. Or Andy—if he lived anywhere else but in a ghetto, if he attended any school that offered the chance for even a half-way decent education, he might very well be a candidate for Harvard.

The point is that in our current drive to eliminate social, economic, cultural, and educational differences, our notable lack of significant progress may be traced back, in part at least, to a semantic "hang-up" in our thinking. Neatly and finally having categorized the victims of our system as "the disadvantaged," we use the label indiscriminately—we preach and teach about the dangers of the stereotype but continue to employ it, nowhere more dangerously than when we talk (or think) about the so-called "disadvantaged" members of our society.

While there is no statistical proof one way or the other, ordinary common sense suggests that only the incorrigibly prejudiced among us (and there are those) can deny the truth that among our disadvantaged young people, or their elders, are relatively as many dull, average, or gifted—as many Andy's, Juan's and Mary's—as among the population at large. Unless, that is, we are ready to join the Stalinites in embracing Mr. Lysenko's theories of the strictly environmental origin of the human condition. The elders, for the most part, are beyond reach. The

Richard Corbin's most recent books are "Guide To Modern English," "The Teaching of Writing in Our Schools," and "Poetry I." Mr. Corbin is past president of the New York State English Council and of the National Council of Teachers of English. He is presently Chairman of the English Department of the Hunter College High School.

disadvantaged young are very much with us, and they are reachable.

Hunter College High School is not, perhaps, the place you would look to for a program aimed at challenging this popular stereotype. Since 1903, it has been a free, public six-year secondary school for the "intellectually gifted," serving the entire City of New York. During that time, the school selected its students by a rigorous and unimpeachable testing procedure. Three years ago, however, the Board of Higher Education requested that the school initiate an exploratory program aimed at challenging the monolithic stereotype of disadvantage. Under a modified admissions policy 25% of each entering seventh grade class is composed of a special group awkwardly categorized, for lack of a better label, "disadvantaged, but potentially gifted." These students, identified largely by subjective means, come from the elementary schools of the Borough of Manhattan (of which, it is estimated, at least 60% must be labeled "disadvantaged schools.")

Once admitted to Hunter, these students are an integral part of the school. There is no tracking or grouping to make them consciously aware of their special status. Only the fact that they are required to participate in a summer orientation program conducted by members of the regular staff differs from the treatment accorded other students, of which 120 of 2,000 applicants will be admitted in September of 1968.

From such an ambivalent situation certain knotty problems are bound to emerge, and of course they have. Unavoidably, in the first year of the program, the selection process was unsophisticated, and the attrition rate in that class has been distressingly high. In the second year, however, a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation made possible a summer orientation program that concentrated on English, mathematics, cultural experiences—and attitudes. The achievement records of the present eighth and seventh graders who had this opportunity to acclimate themselves in advance to the physical plant, the teachers, the teaching techniques, have been notably higher. Objectively, however, it must be granted that this higher level of achievement might possibly be attributed to improved selection techniques and/or to the maturing understanding on the part of the faculty of the special human problem to which they are committed.

It would be senseless to deny that the process by which these special students are selected is faulty. For that matter, the entrance examination that is supposed to screen our regular students is not infallible. But what test is? Yet some testing instru-

ment, faulty or not, has to be employed, and to date, this is the best we have.

By and large, our entrance procedures seem to have yielded good results in the case of both our "regular" and our special students. They are alert, eager, questing children, beautiful in every sense—but with differences that can not be overlooked. Common cultural and historical allusions, for instance, that are taken for granted by the majority, have little or no meaning for our "potentially gifted" minority. In more general terms, there is an identifiable but not easily reconcilable culture gap. In the course of a class discussion, for example, a "special" student offers what at the start promises to be a perceptive observation on literature or life that she both feels and understands. But the presentation slows, comes to a standstill, as the vocabulary needed to verbalize the idea fails to materialize. The next phase is giggling, accompanied by rapid side glances (from frustration more than from despair), followed by the desperate arm and hand gestures that can only be compared to those of a weak swimmer who has unexpectedly stepped into deeper water than anticipated. Then she falls quiet, the promising idea disintegrates. Many times, her more "advantaged" classmate experiences the same frustrating lack of ready verbal tools, but feeling somehow secure in spite of temporary inarticulateness, muddles through, trying and retrying words, until at last she has verbalized her thinking, however imperfectly.

There isn't space here to review the complexity of factors involved—they have been explored anyway in other literature dealing with the changing nature of the urban school. One of the first and chief needs, of course, is to enrich the traditional offering in English by adding materials of literary distinction that at the same time relate to the lives of students whose background of experience has been chiefly the ghetto. At Hunter we are searching ceaselessly for and trying new works, by black writers and white, that offer any promise of serving the needs of *all* our students. Thus, in our seventh grade, *Raisin in the Sun* takes its place beside *Life With Father,* in ninth grade *Cry, the Beloved Country* beside *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* in eleventh, *The Fire Next Time* beside *Walden.* These are only a sampling of the changes we are making in recognition of a changing mission in a changed world.

Though important, the revision of our reading program is only one facet of the problem the urban school faces. At the moment, our faculty is wrestling with two other basic matters—the current meaning and place of grades, and techniques for

offering our special students needed supplementary help without subtlely setting them apart. This admittedly is a paradox that the Goldwaters, Reagans, and others who view the "disadvantaged" from a distance probably cannot understand, but it is crucial.

Especially in an atypical school like Hunter, from which ninety-nine percent plus of our graduates traditionally enter college, the grading of students presents a special problem. Through the years, the faculty has naturally grown to expect extraordinary academic achievement, in the classic sense. For quite understandable reasons, our newly added special students are not generally ready in attitudes or in training to accept our "classic" standards. And many faculty members, though sympathetic to and partially understanding of the absolute need of these students to experience "success," have themselves many philosophic and pragmatic adjustments to make. "Success," after all is a slippery concept!

Even with our main body of regular students, the various departments of the school have never really been in agreement on a policy of grading. One department takes the position that if our students, instead of coming to Hunter, had remained in their neighborhood schools, they would have ranked at the top of their classes. Thus, by electing to commit themselves to an academically highly competitive school, in which they are graded on a standard scale, they are unjustly penalized. That is, students who might have achieved 90% or better in their neighborhood schools may end up at Hunter in the 70's or lower. This seems patently unfair, since when they eventually apply to a college, they may be outranked by students with lesser abilities from other schools. Yet it is difficult to contest the argument that if a strictly objective measurement is applied, by the laws of statistics, half of every group so measured must inevitably fall below the median mark. Colleges, unfortunately, do not discriminate finely, do not recognize that a "failing" student in one school may very well be reported to be a very able student from another, if the same standard scale is applied. Like so many other critical parts of the educational establishment, most college admissions offices are understaffed.

The potentially-gifted disadvantaged student, who has read less, has had less day-to-day experience with spoken and written standard English (probably has had even less experience with functional mathematics), has important attitudinal differences, injects a new and, for unimaginative teachers, a disturbing complication into an already complex dilemma. For she too

might have stood at the top of her class if her parents had had the foresight not to live in a ghetto.

How to close the gap between the somewhat provable "gifted" and the "potentially gifted" is a real puzzler. No one on the Hunter staff questions the fact that we must do so. But because of the differing nature of our respective disciplines, there is understandably little agreement, at the moment, as to how the problem can most wisely be attacked. To require failing (by traditional standards) students to "report after school" would automatically stigmatize and further segregate the very group who need most to experience success and acceptance. Yet to rely on the conscience of teachers with currently normal class loads to care for the special needs of these students, informally and individually, is to run the very real risk that some worthy students will be overlooked—and lost.

This brief recital of the situation at Hunter College High School is, of course, a vast over-simplification of one instance of our national problem. We would like at this time to report even a fractional solution. At this writing, we seem still an eternity from it. Frustrated we are, but we continue trying and will not give up easily. Neither Rome—nor justice, in whatever form—are built in a day. But history suggests that dreams are not for nothing. And at Hunter College High School, we give a great deal of attention to our dreams. So far as we know, Man is the only being that does dream. And we have faith in his ability to solve problems, given time, no matter how insoluable they at first seem.

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